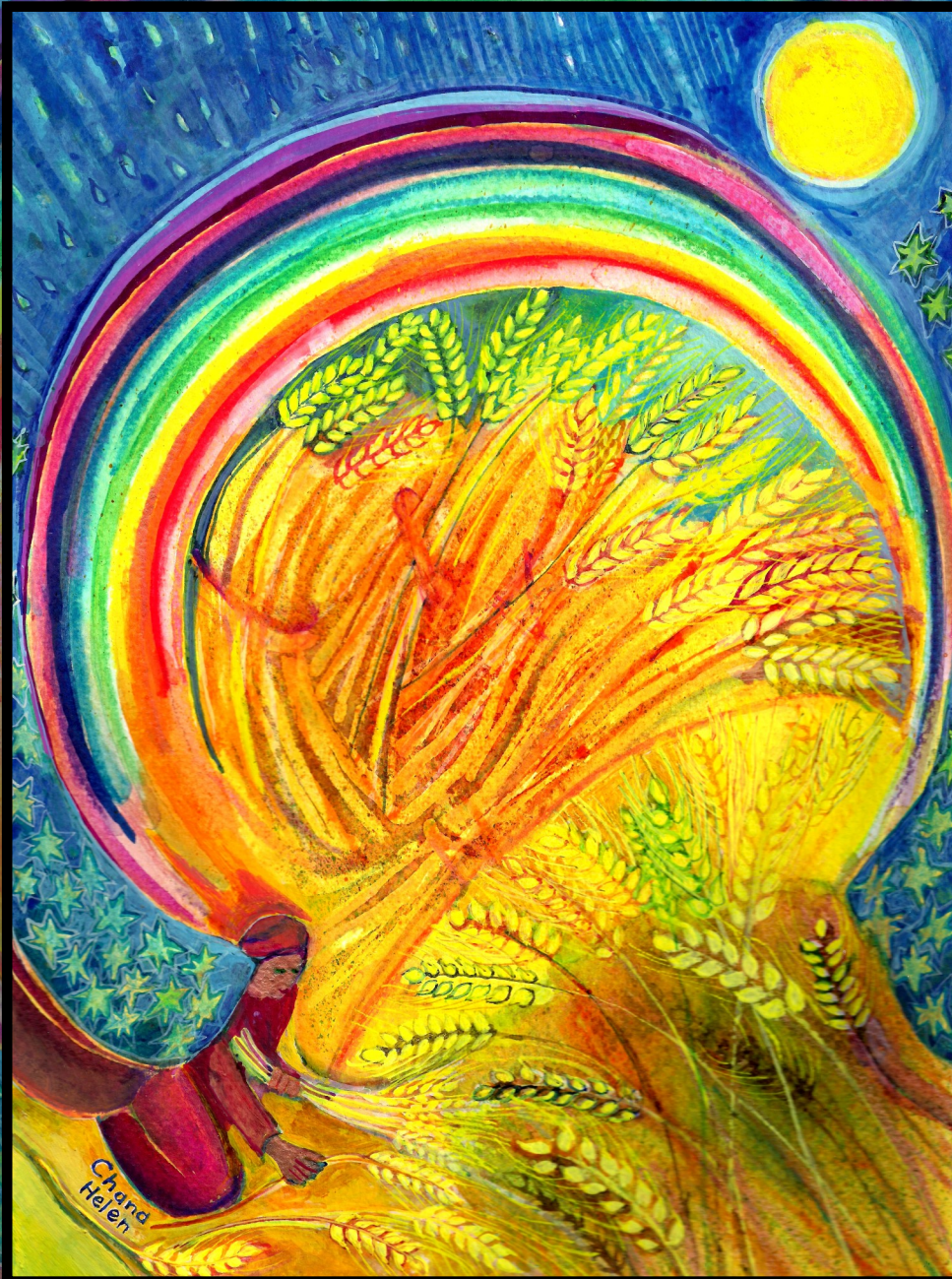


The Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din



The Shavuot Resource Guide

Introduction

The Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din was founded on the principles of welcoming and valuing those who choose Judaism or choose to become members of Jewish families, encouraging Jewish awareness and knowledge among people who indicate interest in Jewish life and culture, and promoting widespread awareness of available paths into Judaism.

As part of our mission, we are creating new ways to support the convert within the community as well as the community that supports the convert. The Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din has compiled a collection of teachings regarding conversion with the intention that it be used by synagogues and other Jewish communities around the West as a basis for discussions about conversion. Megillat Ruth is the quintessential story about accepting the *ger* into our community.

This collection is focused around Shavuot because conversion is a natural topic during the holiday. It also acknowledges the challenges people face when choosing to convert and/or integrate into Jewish society. We hope Jewish communities will increase their understanding and acceptance of those who choose Judaism through the study of these materials or through the camaraderie developed by working together in small groups.

This publication has been made possible through a generous funding from the Gallant Family Fund/Herbert H. Schiff Foundation.

Rabbi Daniel Shevitz, Co-Chair and Av Bet Din
Rabbi Stephen Einstein, Co-Chair and S'gan Av Bet Din
Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din Board of Governors

Table of Contents

- ❑ **Two Journeys to God: Avram and Ruth**
Meir Bargerion
- ❑ **Exploring Texts of Welcome and Acceptance**
Rabbi Lisa Bock
- ❑ **Who Was Ruth Before She Joined the Hebrew People?**
Arlene Chernow
- ❑ **Celebrating Renewal, Body and Soul**
Rabbi Corinne Copnick
- ❑ **“Where You Go, I Go” Telling the Story of Ruth**
A Dramatic Celebration and Learning¹
Rabbi Janet Madden
- ❑ **Believing, Belonging, Behaving**
Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben
- ❑ **Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women**²
Rabbi Ruth H. Sohn
- ❑ **Spiritual Audacity: *The Role of Conversion in the Bible*
*And The Conversion Experience***³
Cheryl Stone
- ❑ **Why do People Convert to Judaism? The Rabbis’ Responses**
Rabbi Dvora Weisberg

¹ Designed for seniors, suitable for all ages

² Excerpt from a chapter by Rabbi Ruth H. Sohn in Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women, ed. Penina Adelman. The Jewish Publication Society, 2005

³ Designed for teens and young adults, suitable for all ages

Format: Guided group text study with discussion questions. The leader is encouraged to add questions during the session based on the group's conversation.

Objectives

1. The learners will gain familiarity with the Hebrew Bible texts presented.
2. The learners will be able to articulate the plain meaning of the texts.
3. The learners will be able to apply insights gained from each of the texts to the topic of religious conversion to Judaism.
4. The learners will be able to compare and contrast how each of the texts can be interpreted within the context of conversion to Judaism.
5. The learners will draw personal meaning from these texts regarding their own conversion experience, **OR** gain empathy for the experience of others who have converted to Judaism, as appropriate to their situation.

Procedure

1. Leader introduces learning activity.
2. Learners are divided into chevruta, or into larger study groups of up to four people.
3. Learners are instructed to have one group member read a text aloud in Hebrew and English, or English only, as appropriate.
4. Learners then engage with study questions.
5. Leader facilitates a larger-group discussion of response to study questions and other insights and learnings for each text in turn.
6. Leader facilitates a larger-group discussion to compare, contrast, and synthesize the insights from both texts.

Text #1: Genesis 12:1-4¹

<p>(1) Adonai said to Avram, “Go forth (Lech Lecha) from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. (2) I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. (3) I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you.” (4) Avram went forth as Adonai had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.</p>	<p>(א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ: (ב) וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמֶךָ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: (ג) וְאֶבְרַכָּה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמִקְלָלֶיךָ אֲאָר וְנִבְרְכוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפָּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה: (ד) וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלָיו יְהוָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט וְאַבְרָם בֶּן-חָמֵשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה בָּצֵאתוֹ מִחָרָן:</p>
---	---

Discussion Questions

Reader’s Note: In these verses, Avram has not yet been re-named Avraham by God. See Genesis 17:5.

1. “Lech Lecha” is often translated into English as “go forth.” However, the medieval commentator Rashi teaches that this verse should be understood to say, “Go for yourself, for your own good...To make your nature known in the world.” How does this interpretation change the meaning of the text?

¹ English translation is JPS 1985 version.

2. The 19th century Chassidic Rabbi Aharon II of Karlin teaches that Avram's example shows the world that "every Jew must go for himself – to himself – to his roots, because that is a Jew's purpose."² How does Avram's journey to himself become the purpose for us today?
3. This text marks the beginning of God entering into a covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. What parallels does the text offer to a person who has chosen, or is considering choosing, Jewish life?
4. How might we view Avram as an example to the Jewish people? As an example to people who are converting to Judaism?

Text #2: Ruth 1:1-18³

<p>(1) In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. (2) The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.</p>	<p>א וַיְהִי בַיָּמִי שֶׁכָּפַט הַשְּׂפָטִים וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ וְיִלְדָּא אִישׁ מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה לְגוֹר בְּשַׂדֵּי מוֹאָב הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו: ב וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִמֶּלֶךְ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נְעֹמִי וּשְׁמֵי שְׁנֵי בָנָיו מַחְלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן אֶפְרַתִּים מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂדֵי-מוֹאָב וַיְהִיו-שָׁם:</p>
---	---

² Aharon Yaakov Greenberg. *Torah Gems [Vol. 1]*. Tel Aviv: Y. Orenstein, Yavne Publishing House, Ltd., 1992. p.97.

³ English translation is New International Version.

(3) Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.
 (4) They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, (5) both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.
 (6) When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. (7) With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.
 (8) Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. (9) May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud (10) and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

ג וַיָּמָת אֱלִימֶלֶךְ אִישׁ נַעֲמִי וַתִּשָּׂאֵר הָיָא
 וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ:
 ד וַיִּשְׂאוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִמּוֹאבִּיּוֹת שֵׁם הָאֶחָת
 עֹרְפָּה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית רוּת וַיָּשְׁבוּ שָׁם
 כְּעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים: ה וַיָּמָוּתוּ גַם־שְׁנֵיהֶם
 מַחֲלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן וַתִּשָּׂאֵר הָאִשָּׁה מִשְׁנֵי
 יְלָדֶיהָ וּמֵאִישָׁהּ:
 ו וַתֵּקָם הָיָא וְכִלְתִּיהָ וַתָּשָׁב מִשְׁנֵי
 מוֹאָב כִּי שָׁמְעָה בַּשָּׂדֶה מוֹאָב כִּי־פָקַד
 יְהוָה אֶת־עַמּוֹ לָתֵת לָהֶם לֶחֶם:
 ז וַתֵּצֵא מִן־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה־שָׁמָּה
 וּשְׁתֵּי כִלְתֵּיהָ עִמָּהּ וַתֵּלְכֶנָּה בַּדֶּרֶךְ
 לָשׁוּב אֶל־אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה:
 ח וַתֹּאמֶר נַעֲמִי לְשְׁתֵּי כִלְתֵּיהָ לֵּכְנָה
 שֹׁבְנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּהּ יַעֲשֶׂה [יַעֲשֶׂה]
 יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד כַּאֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם
 עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי:
 ט יִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם וּמִצָּאֵן מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה
 בֵּית אִישָׁה
 י וַתִּשָּׂק לָהֶן וַתִּשְׂאֲנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכֶּינָה:
 י וַתֹּאמְרֶנָּה־לָּהּ כִּי־אֵתְךָ נָשׁוּב לְעַמֶּךָ:

(11) But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?"

(12) Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— (13) would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!"

(14) At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. (15) "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

(16) But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. (17) Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates

יא ותאמר נעמי שבנה בנתי למה
תלכנה עמי העוד-לי בנים במעי והיו
לכם לאנשים:

יב שבנה בנתי לכן כי זקנתי מהיות
לאיש כי אמרתי יש-לי תקוה גם
הייתי חלילה לאיש וגם ילדתי בנים:
יג הלהן תשברנה עד אשר יגדלו
הלהן תעגנה לבתי היות לאיש אל
בנתי כי-מר-לי מאד מכם כי-יצאה
בי יד-יהוה:

יד ותשנה קולן ותבכינה
עוד ותשק ערפה לחמותה ורות
דבקה בה:

טו ותאמר הנה שבה יבמתך אל-עמה
ואל-אלהיה שובי אחרי יבמתך:
טז ותאמר רות אל-תפגעי-בי לעזבך
לשוב מאחריך:

כז אל-אשר תלכי אלך ובאשר תליני
אלין עמך עמי ואלהיך אלהי: יז
באשר תמותי אמות ושם אקבר כה
יעשה יהוה לי וכה יסוף כי חמות
יפריד ביני ובינך: יח ותרא

you and me.” (18) When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.	כִּי־מִתְאַמֶּצֶת הִיא לָלֶכֶת אִתָּהּ וַתַּחֲדֹל לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ:
--	--

Discussion Questions

1. Naomi and her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah are three widows living in a patriarchal system. What do you imagine is significant about this?
2. Why does Naomi urge Ruth and Orpah to return to their mother’s homes and not accompany her to Judah?
3. Both Ruth and Orpah initially wish to accompany Naomi, but Orpah agrees to stay in Moab. How might Ruth have felt about Orpah’s decision?
4. Which portion of this text contains the most significant message for people considering conversion to Judaism?
5. How might Ruth be considered an example for those who have converted to Judaism? Or to Jews in general?

Large Group Discussion Questions

1. Both Avram and Ruth begin journeys. How are these journeys similar? How are they different?
2. What characteristics distinguish Avram and Ruth from each other? What characteristics do they share?
3. God speaks to Avram directly. Where is God in Ruth’s story?
4. What do the stories of Avram and Ruth have to say to those who have converted or are converting to Judaism?
5. What personal insights are you taking away from the study of these two texts?

Exploring Texts of Welcome and Acceptance

Rabbi Lisa Bock

- Most adults have experienced leaving home. Was it exciting? Frightening? Both? How do you think Abram and Sarai felt upon leaving home?

Genesis 12:4 Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the souls that they made in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan.

Genesis 12:1 The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.

- Abram and Sarai have set off on a journey, to a land that God promised to show them. Must we leave home to be on a journey? What types of journeys are there?
- They have no children of their own at this point in their lives. What do you think of the phrase "and the souls that they made in Haran?"

Genesis 18:1 The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. ² Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, ³ he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree.

- Abram is named by God. He becomes Abraham (and Sarai becomes Sarah). At the age of 99 he circumcises himself. He and Sarah become the original matriarch and patriarch of the Jewish people.
- What is Abraham doing when he looks up and sees the three men? What does he then do? What does this say about him? What does this teach us?

- Joseph was sold to a slave caravan by his brothers and since has made his way to Egypt. His successful interpretation of dreams leads him to become an advisor to Pharaoh.

Genesis 41:45 Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt.

⁵⁰ Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On, bore to him.

- What does this indicate about Joseph and his family?
- What do we know about Asenath? If you were her, or if you were Joseph, what do you think their lives would be like?
- The two sons of Joseph and Asenath are Ephraim and Manasseh. What might it be like to be their sons?

Ruth 1 ¹⁴ They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law."

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you."

¹⁸ When *Naomi* saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her; ¹⁹ and the two went on until they reached Bethlehem.

1. Ruth and Orpah are Moabite sisters-in-law whose Israelite husbands have died. Their mother-in-law Naomi is returning home, from Moab back to Israel.
 - a. Why would one stay with Naomi, and the other return to the home of her own family?
2. Ruth declares to Naomi, "wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."
3. Is Ruth making a religious statement?
 - a. Is this more than just a religious statement?
 - b. Why does she make this long statement?
4. Ruth makes a choice to leave her home and familiar surroundings and customs to journey to a new place. Most adults have experienced leaving home and had the experience of being in a new and unfamiliar place.
 - a. How did it feel? What did you hope for?
5. Ruth was an outsider and she became a true Israelite. She was a blessing to all around her and for generations to come.
 - a. Is Ruth unique, an exception?

THE STRANGER

By Lisa Bock

I was the stranger.
A strange young girl from an uncertain
background.
I met your son.
We fell in love.
You were patient,
You held your breath, waiting.
Waiting for puppy love to go away.
But the love grew stronger,
And the stranger became less strange.

I grew to love you, too.
Your ways were never strange to me.
I saw the bonds within the family,
I was awed by your commitment to the
House of Israel,
I was inspired by your love of Torah, and
of God.
Perhaps you saw this; perhaps you just
hoped-

You invited me to Chanukah,
To Passover. To Passover again.
To Shabbat dinner. I loved the holidays.
I watched while you lit the candles.
I imagined that I could do the same.
I fell in love with your son,
With you,
And with your people.
I was no longer a stranger.
You welcomed me.

In the Book of Ruth,
Ruth says to Naomi,

"Do not urge me to leave you,
to turn back and not follow you.
For wherever you go, I will go;
wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and
your God my God."
You became Naomi to my Ruth,
I became your daughter.

You gave us, the newlyweds,
gifts- Shabbat candles, a *Chanukiah*,
a mezuzah for our new home,
all the food and planning for your
grandson's bris;
a new baby dress for your
granddaughter's baby-naming;
a beautifully tattered, well-used Jewish
cookbook,
(with the stains on the pages so I could
tell which recipes were the family
favorites),
boxes of matzah bough on sale for
Passover,
you gave us your love and advice.
But your love of Judaism was the biggest
gift of all.

Thank you, mom.

The poem, *The Stranger*, gives us a new prism through which to view the Book of Ruth, in this modern midrash.

1. The “Naomi” in this poem began to welcome the stranger. How did she express this welcome?
2. What can be learned from this poem?
3. What did Lisa’s mother-in-law do to pass on a love for Judaism?

All of these texts have a unified message, from the earliest to the most modern.

1. What do they tell us about the importance of welcome and acceptance?
2. How has this message changed over time?
3. How can we make these stories and words come alive in our communities today?

Ruth was the great grandmother of King David; she is often thought of as the first convert to Judaism; we know her stirring words, “Wherever you go, I will go.....your people will be my people and your God will be my God,” but we know so little about Ruth before she chose to follow her mother-in-law Naomi. The text does not even tell us which one of Naomi’s sons she married. Most significantly, the Book of Ruth, has left us a great mystery, a mystery with new importance in the 21st century as the Jewish community has been enriched by the presence of thousands of people new to Judaism. The text tells us that a man named Elimelech, his wife and two sons, left Bethlehem in the land of Judah during a famine and went to the land of Moab. Elimelech dies, the sons married Moabite women, and the sons died. At this point, with little information, the epic story of the journey of Ruth begins in most people’s experience.

I think that it is time to stop and look at the story differently and ask a number of important questions.

Who were Mahlon and Chilion? Their names mean sickly (or invalid) and wasting away. They were old enough to travel with their parents, and old enough to marry once they arrived in Moab. Did they choose to stay with their parents? Did they think that others from Jerusalem would join them in Moab and establish a community there? Was it their plan to return to Jerusalem? How did they meet Ruth and Orpah? Were they in love? Did they tell their wives about the customs in their own land? Did they hope to return to Jerusalem with their new wives or did they plan to become a part of their wives’ communities? Did Mahlon and Chilion tell their wives about their people and their God? Who were Ruth and Orpah when they met Mahlon and Chilion? What were their relationships with their family, their customs and beliefs? Were they happy in their community of origin? Perhaps curious about the rest of the world? Distanced from their

beliefs and open to another way to view the world? Were both marriages loving and warm?

The most important questions may be: Who was Naomi? What did Naomi say when her sons brought home Moabite wives? Did Naomi want to leave Bethlehem? The text tells us that there was a famine in the land; other families did not leave, why did she? Did she do her best to bring her customs and beliefs with her and establish them in her new household in Moab? Did she long for her friends to join her there? Did she hope to establish a small community there?

When her sons brought home Moabite women, what did she say? Did she welcome them? Did she see them as her chance to establish her small community? Did she teach them her customs and beliefs? Did she tell them about her people, her God? Did they pray together? Did she share meals with her daughters-in-law, did she share her love, did she share a glimpse into her community?

“They lived there about 10 years” and that is the mystery. What happened to create Ruth’s loyalty? What can we learn from this mystery about how families can welcome new partners, and possible partners into the community? What was said? What was done? What did Ruth feel? What did she learn? That is our challenge: together, let’s create the kind of love Naomi had to give so that we can extend a loving welcome to each and every person who explores our community.

Discussion Questions:

There is so much to learn from the Book of Ruth, but in the 21st century, as the Jewish community is working to include individuals who were not born Jewish, individuals of color, and members of the LGBTQ community, let us take another look at Chapter 1 and speculate on the silence left by the phrase “They lived there for about 10 years.”

1. Was there a person who played a role in your Jewish journey? Was it positive? Negative? Did the person use the same pronouns that you use? Was the person older, your age, younger?
2. If there was such a person, can you share the impact they had on you? Did they set an example by the way that they led their life? Did they offer to share their experiences?
3. If the relationship was positive, what did they do to make you feel welcome? To empower you to move forward, to make you feel that you could or should go on the journey?
4. If you came from a different religious background, or an assimilated Jewish background, what drew you to Judaism? Did you learn on your own? Attend services?
5. If you first began to explore Judaism through a relationship with another person, what did they tell you about Judaism and why was it important to them?
6. What role did the community play in your Jewish journey?
7. Have you welcomed someone into the Jewish community? How did you do that?

Celebrating Renewal, Body and Soul

Rabbi Corinne Copnick

(Note to Facilitator: This Study Guide is intended to elicit and encourage questions and discussion at any stage along the way you feel is helpful to your particular audience and to the learning. Since I have divided the Study Guide into Part One and Part Two, a natural question period or break occurs between the two parts, as well as before the thematic discussion at the end. Optimally, since each part complements the other, they can be used sequentially, but depending on the time available, either part provides a lesson plan on its own. The discussion on specific themes could provide a third session, or possibly a paper if used in a classroom setting.)

PART ONE: Connecting Passover and Shavuot—A Journey to Renewal

“The purpose of the Exodus,” as scholar Jeffrey M. Cohen notes, was to bring Israel to Mount Sinai and bestow upon her the Torah, so that Israel would serve only one God and not foreign masters. ‘*When you bring out the people from Egypt, you will all worship God upon this mountain*’ (Exodus 3:12). **The counting of the Omer [sheaves of barley], beginning on the second night of Pesach, was intended to link the two festivals of Pesach and Shavuot....**”¹ It took seven weeks to complete this bonding.

Why seven weeks? It took that length of time for the Israelites, known then as the Hebrews, to flee from enslavement in Egypt (*Mitzrayim*, the narrow place), into the wilderness on the second night of Passover (the 16th of the Hebrew calendar month,

¹ Jeffrey M. Cohen, “The Omer and the Sefirah,” *1001 Questions and Answers on Pesach* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc. 1996), 175.

Nissan), until, by a round-about route, they reached their destination, Mount Sinai. It was the 6th of the Hebrew month, *Sivan*.

What are the *Omer*? And why do we count them?

The Omer represent the seven expressive aspects of Godliness, the *sephirot* (godly emanations) of the soul, a mystic concept originally attributed to the Kabbalistic *Sefer Yetzirah*. In biblical practice, however, each Omer was a mnemonic helper in the form of a tied sheaf of barley, 49 of them in all, to count how many days had passed since the second night of Passover. As they traveled for seven weeks in the wilderness in their flight from Egypt, the Hebrews also reflected on their deeply held values, “the bonds with God that make us human” (www.Aish.com).² The 50th day (i.e., the 50th sheaf) marked the arrival at Mount Sinai, where Moses would ascend the summit, and the Ten Utterances or Commandments would be revealed, thus cementing the Covenant between God and the Jewish people.

In Israel, years after the journey through the wilderness, “counting the Omer brought together the agricultural and spiritual aspects of the two festivals. It ensured that the Israelite farmers would never forget that the blessings of their fields were gifts from God. On *Pesach*, an Omer, [now in the form of a specific dry measure, an estimated 3.64 litres] of barley, the earliest ripening crop, was presented as a meal offering. And seven weeks later, a similar presentation was made from the first batch of wheat to ripen.”³

The symbolic practice of Counting the Omer, which remains to this day, represents a sizeable time for springtime reflection. Each Omer (traditionally each sheaf of barley or cake of barley meal) represents a week of meditation, every night on the

²Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, “Counting the Omer,” <http://www.aish.com/h/o/lac/48970931.html?s?=raw>, accessed 2016.

³ Cohen, “The Omer and the Sefirah,” *1001 Questions and Answers*, 175.

specific attribute (*sephira*) for the week, and each week the *sephirot* grow a little more complex as their godly values combine.

Counting the Omer—The Freedom to Reflect

(Note to Facilitator: The attributes associated with each Omer are presented simply here for easier comprehension. The detailed way each week's attribute is sequentially blended into the attribute of the following week (e.g., the sephira of Chesed is blended into Gevura the second week) is not included here, although it can be mentioned.)

There is a specific Omer for each day of each of the seven weeks, and each night that Omer is preceded by a short introduction specifying the particular attribute. It can be a very emotional, cumulative experience. Here are the specific topics of reflection for every night of each week. Being true to each of these aspects of godliness empowers our souls.

Omer 1 (Week 1): Chesed (kindness, compassion)

Omer 2: (Week 2): Gevura (strength, empowerment of one's soul)

Omer 3: (Week 3): Tiferet (beauty, splendor)

Omer 4: (Week 4): Netzach (infinity)

Omer 5: (Week 5): Hod (gratitude)

Omer 6: (Week 6): Yesod (foundation)

Omer 7: (Week 7): Malchut (kingship)

As Moses, made the ascent to the top of Mount Sinai to encounter the Divine, his followers remained at the foot of the Mount. During the march to Mount Sinai, many of the freed multitude accompanied the Hebrews who were about to receive the Ten Commandments intended to govern their lives as Jews.

The Gift of the Ten Commandments:

A Creative Meditation by Rabbi Yael Levy, *A Journey Through the Wilderness*⁴

1. “I am, I was, I will be. I am the unfolding of all that is. I am constant transformation calling you forward to be.
2. You cannot arrest me in motion. You cannot grasp or hold me. Do not strive for certainty. Do not seek permanence.
3. Do not use a Divine name to make false promises. Do not use sacred teachings to lift up a destructive path.
4. Rest, Stop, Pause. Honor creation. Declare your freedom. Rest and allow others to rest as well.
5. Honor your parents. Honor your ancestors. Honor those upon whose shoulders you stand.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not betray
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not use the power of words to hurt or destroy.
10. Feel the fullness of your life. Don’t be led astray to comparing yourself to others. Don’t get lost in desiring what others have. Be content, be fulfilled with what your life brings.”

⁴ Rabbi Yael Levy, “The Fiftieth Day,” *A Journey Through the Wilderness: A Mindfulness Approach to the Ancient Jewish Practice of Counting the Omer*, 2nd edition (Philadelphia: A Project of A Way In, 2012), Kindle edition, location 829-840. See also omer@jewishmindfulness.org; www.mishkan.org/awi; facebook.com/jmindfulness. Many thanks to Rabbi Levy for permission to print this passage from her book.

PART TWO: The Book of Ruth—Celebrating the First Convert (30 to 45 minutes)

At *Shavuot*, during the march and ascendance to Mount Sinai, where the biblical Hebrews receive the Ten Commandments intended to affirm the moral precepts with which we, as Jews, should govern our lives, the freed multitude marches with us. It is springtime, the time of renewal, of rebirth, as we celebrate those who accept living a Jewish life by these commandments. **And at *Shavuot*, we celebrate the courage, loyalty, and love of Ruth, the first convert, recorded in the *Book of Ruth* in the Hebrew Bible.**

According to Rabbi Rifka Soncino, *The Book of Ruth* is set during the time of the Judges (1200-1000 BCE) but was probably written in 70 CE. Through her vow to Naomi, her mother-in-law, and her marriage to Boaz, Naomi's relative, Ruth became the first recorded Jewish convert in history.⁵

SOURCES:

“*The Book of Ruth*, which is written in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, *K'tuvim* (*Writings*), is a beautiful folktale written in four short chapters. [The story] celebrates the loyalty and reward of a young Moabite widow (Ruth) who chooses to follow her Israelite mother-in-law (Naomi) back to Bethlehem after Naomi was bereaved of her own husband and two sons. Ruth's sister-in-law, Orpah, who was married to one of the two deceased brothers, returns to her community, but Ruth decides to cleave to Naomi and share her fate in Judah. Ruth's social status rises rather quickly. Starting as a *nochriyah*, foreigner (*Ruth 2:10*), she next describes herself as a *shif'chah*, maidservant (*Ruth 2:10*), and then as an *amah*, handmaid

⁵ Rabbi Rifka Soncino, <http://www.reformjudaism.org>, accessed 2019.

(*Ruth 3:9*). By the end of the story, Boaz, her future husband, refers to her as an *ishah*, wife (*Ruth 4:10*), and the text hails her as an ancestress of King David (*Ruth 4:17*)”

—Rabbi Rifka Soncino, <http://www.reformjudaism.org>.⁶

“Do not urge me to leave you,] to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God: Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you.”
(*Ruth 1:16-17 JPS*).⁷

(Optional—male/female relations).

“The verse states. ‘And God made the two great luminaries,’ but then [it contradicts itself] and says, ‘The great luminary to rule the day and the small luminary to rule the night’ (Genesis 1:16)! The Moon said to God, ‘Master of the Universe, *is it possible for two monarchs to share one crown?*’” God replied, ‘Go and diminish yourself.’ She [the Moon] said: Because I said something appropriate, I must make myself small?”

—Talmud, Hullin 60 B⁸

“Through this mythic story, the Sages point to an internal tension in the creation of the cosmos.” The contradiction between equality and hierarchy is eventually resolved

⁶ Soncino, <http://www.reformjudaism.org>, accessed 2019.

⁷ *JPS Hebrew-Jewish Tanakh*: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation, 2nd ed. Jewish Publication (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1999-5759.

⁸ “ACT TWO,” p.114, accessed on Sefaria.com, 2019.

by calling the cosmos a dominion (*memshalah*) instead of a kingdom (*malchut*).
Now each reigns in their own realm.⁹

—Rabbeinu Bahya (Numbers 29:15)¹⁰

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION:

(Note to Facilitator: Depending on the size of the group, it can be divided into sub-groups for discussion, with two or perhaps three themes assigned to each group. After a set time, a member of each sub-group will be invited to share their findings with the whole group. If the group is small, a general discussion of as many themes as time permits can ensue.)

Why was the *Book of Ruth* written? Is it even more important today?

1. **CONVERSION:** Why is Ruth considered Judaism's first convert? What is the true nature of conversion? How is a convert received today by other Jews?
2. **LEVIRATE MARRIAGE:** What is it? According to Jewish law in biblical times, when a woman was widowed, the kinsman closest to her late husband was expected to take care of her by marrying her. If she was childless, he was required to help her procreate. What happens in the Ruth story?
3. **SEXUALITY:** What does Naomi advise Ruth to do? Naomi is aware that Boaz has taken note of the comely Ruth in the field. She advises her to seek out Boaz in his tent at night and sleep at his feet, an act of submission, offering herself to him. (Optional: Does the mythic story quoted in the source above apply to the relationship between men and women?)

⁹"PRELUDE," Sefaria.com, 115-117, accessed 2019.

¹⁰

4. INTERMARRIAGE: What does the story tell us about intermarriage? Then? Now? Do you think it was the author's goal to promote the inclusion of outsiders, such as Ruth, in the *kehillah* of the Jewish people?
5. ANCESTRY: The unusual union of Boaz, the leader of his generation and head of the Sanhedrin, and Ruth, a destitute Moabite convert (who traces her sad lineage to Lot and Sodom), eventually leads to their descendant, King David, and ultimately (according to Jewish legend) to the Messiah. This was ground-breaking at a time when marriage between a Jew and a Moabite was severely frowned upon. How does this apply to today?
6. COMPASSION: Biblical commentators note that Ruth and Naomi are united by the Jewish value of *chesed*—compassion. How does compassion play a role in this story?
7. MALE/FEMALE ROLES: How do male and female roles differ in this story? A mythic analogy is made about the roles the sun and the moon each play in the cosmos. Does it apply to the biblical story of Ruth? Whose light is more important? Why must one light be diminished? How would you interpret this analogy today?
8. FOOD FOR THOUGHT IN 2020? What did it mean to be Jewish in the time of Ruth and Naomi? For a man? For a woman? What does it mean to be Jewish now? How would you write the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz today? Would you change anything?

Meditation—"The Holy is Revealed Through Us."

(Note to Facilitator: If desired, this beautiful meditation can be first read by all silently, or you can lead them in reading it aloud together, or both in sequence. This will conclude the study session.)

- **SOURCE :** Excerpted with permission from Rabbi Yael Levy, "Divine Presence Within Majesty," *Journey Through the Wilderness*, Kindle edition, location 785-855.

"It was before dawn on the fiftieth day.
The air was cold and the sky deep deep blue
When all of us awoke.

"Together we walked slowly toward the mountain and stood.
The ground trembled.
The mountain began to smoke.
Lightning flashed. Thunder roared.
A shofar horn called from the depths of the earth.
Then all was still.
Into the core of our being,
Within our heart, our soul, on the lines of our face,
The One spoke,
And everything vanished,
There was no I, no you, no tree,
No bird, no water, nor fire.
There was only One,
One breath. Nothing more.
Only One.

Forever. Eternal.

One....

One...

The One inside the many...

And we listened....

[On] Shavuot, the 50th day, we renew our covenant with the One.

We stand together with all life and say *Hineni*.

Here I am. Ready, willing to enter into relationship.

Ready and willing to be of service.

May my heart be open. May my intentions be clear.

May the work of my hands bring forth blessing and peace.”¹¹

¹¹ Levy, “Divine Presence Within Majesty,” *Journey*, Kindle edition, location 785-855.



“Where You Go, I Go”

Telling the Story of Ruth

A Dramatic Celebration and Learning

Rabbi Janet Madden

Cast: Presenter 1 and 2

Narrator

Naomi

Orpah

Ruth

Presenter 1: Hello! Chag Sameach

Presenter 2: And Chag Sameach to you. But wait a minute—can you tell me—What is this Chag that we’re celebrating?

Presenter 1: We’re celebrating Shavuot! Shavuot is the Hebrew word for “weeks” and so this is the Feast of Weeks. We celebrate Shavuot seven weeks after the second day of Pesach. In Biblical times, farmers brought their first-fruits offerings of barley to the Temple at Pesach. On that day, the counting of the weeks began. They counted seven weeks, or 49 days, and on the 50th day was the feast of Shavuot, which celebrates the offering of the first-fruits of the wheat harvest seven weeks later.

We read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. The story tells of Ruth’s marriage and conversion which took place during the harvest season, from the beginning of the barley harvest to the conclusion of the wheat harvest. Through her marriage to Boaz, Ruth, a gentile, became the great-grandmother of King David, who was born and died on Shavuot. She became the mother of the royal lineage of David.

Shavuot is also a time of remembering the giving of the Torah. The first Shavuot took place 50 days after the Israelites left Egypt...50 days after the angel of death had “passed-over” their homes in Egypt when he saw the blood of the lamb on the lintel and doorposts...50 days after the first Pesach. They had arrived at Mt. Sinai, and Moses had gone upon the mountaintop to meet with God. And it was there, on that first Shavuot, that God gave the Torah to Moses.

The Torah tells us that God said to Moses, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to me. Now, if you will obey (sh’ma – hear) my voice, and keep (sha’mar – guard) my covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to me above all people. You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.”

Presenter 2: Wow! So, in a way Shavuot completes Passover?

Presenter 1: Yes. That’s exactly right. Passover and Shavuot are related. And because every Jewish holiday has special foods, I have a question for you: Why do we eat dairy foods on Shavuot?

Presenter 2: Well, there are several reasons:

The Torah refers to the Land of Israel as “flowing with **milk** and honey” (Exodus 3:18), so when the people reached the land, they ate dairy on that original Shavuot, and we do today, too. In addition, Torah is compared to milk. There is a verse that says, “Like honey and **milk** [the Torah] lies under your tongue” (Song of Songs 4:11). Just as milk has the ability to fully sustain the body of a human being, the Torah provides all the “spiritual nourishment” necessary for the human soul. So, we eat dairy foods on Shavuot to commemorate the 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah.

And one more thing: the eating of dairy foods on Shavuot also commemorates the early life of Moses. Moses was born on the seventh day of Adar, and stayed at home for three months with his family, before being placed in the Nile River on the sixth of Sivan, the day on which Shavuot falls. Moses was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted Moses and took him to live in Pharaoh's palace. But Moses kept refusing to nurse from Egyptian women. Finally, Pharaoh's daughter found one woman who Moses agreed to nurse from--Yocheved, Moses' biological mother!

So, now we'd like to dramatize for you one of the most important parts of the story.

The Story of Ruth

(If you doing this in a community of elders consider asking three of them to play the roles of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth; shawls over the heads work well for costumes)

Narrator: Tonight as we gather to celebrate the Feast of Shavuot, we also take a look at the life of Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David. Long ago, when the Judges ruled Israel, the land of Canaan suffered a terrible famine. Elimelech, a prominent Jew from Bethlehem, took his wife, Naomi, and his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, to the land of Moab to escape the famine. The family settled there and the sons married Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. Then, tragedy struck. First Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and then both of her sons died. Naomi was suddenly a widow. All she had left were her two bereaved daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

In Moab, Naomi heard how God had come to the aid of his people in Israel by providing food for them. With her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living in Moab and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law...

Naomi: Go back to your mother's home, and May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your late husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.

Orpah: No, mother, Ruth and I want to stay with you.

Naomi: No, Return to your homes, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters. I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me - even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons - would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, but we must part ways.

Orpah: (Weeps). Maybe you are right. (Orpah kisses her mother-in-law good-bye, and Ruth clings to her). Good-bye.

Naomi: Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.

Ruth: Don't urge me to leave you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die I

will die, and there I will be buried. May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.

Narrator: When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth, the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, and they arrived in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. When the two women came to Bethlehem, the whole town was excited when they saw Naomi.

Presenter 1: So, what does this story teach us about Ruth and her relationship to Naomi?

Presenter 2: Ruth is particularly recognized by our Rabbis for her kindness. But there's much more here. In a relationship between parent and child-in-law there's the potential for so much friction. There are often different family cultures, religions, expectations, geography. It may take a lot to overcome these differences. Here we see Ruth respecting her mother-in-law and her values so much that she surrenders her country, her culture, the land of her birth for the sake of that relationship.

Presenter 1: Ruth is a convert to Judaism; she finds the Jewish tradition as represented by Naomi so appealing that she will give up everything for it. I'm wondering if any of our residents have had similar or different experiences with their sons or daughters-in law? **(Open up for five minutes of questions).**

Presenter 2: Ruth treats Naomi with such loving respect. She takes care of her even when they return to Israel, Naomi's birthplace. Ruth is a model of clinging

to the tradition and cleaving to the Torah. Ruth also fits into the theme of harvesting that Shavuot represents.

Presenter 1: The love between Ruth and Naomi is one of the two great love stories in this book; the second is the love between Ruth and Boaz. These two love stories help describe in human terms some of the characteristics of God's love for us. What can you tell us about the love story of Ruth and Boaz?

Presenter 2: The Torah teaches that we should not harvest all that is in the fields; what is left behind was for people like Ruth and Naomi, widows. When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, grains were being harvested, and Ruth asked Naomi's permission to go into the grain fields and gather what she could. Ruth chose a field that happened to belong belonged to Boaz who was a close relative to Naomi's deceased husband's family.

One day, Boaz, who was a rich landowner, came out to his fields and noticed Ruth gleaning grain from his fields; he inquired of his servant, who is over the harvesters, who this lady was. The servant replied, "It is the Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab." Boaz had heard of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi; he knew of the difficult circumstances she and Naomi were in.

Boaz went to Ruth, and told her not to leave his fields but stay; he invited her to eat with him and his workers during mealtimes; he also commanded his servants to deliberately leave grain for her to glean. Boaz kept a protective eye on Ruth; the first day in his field, Ruth gleaned into the evening and returned home to Naomi where she gave her all that she had gathered. Naomi was astonished; she asked Ruth where she had gone to glean; Ruth told her of Boaz's kindness. Naomi was ecstatic with joy; she told Ruth that Boaz was kin to her and Ruth gleaned in

Boaz's fields till the end of the harvest season.

Boaz and Ruth became friends, which led Ruth to ask for the protection of both G-d and Boaz. And she asked Boaz to marry her. Boaz agreed to marry Ruth but of course there was a complication with another relative of Naomi's who had first right to marry Ruth. He agreed to give up any claim on Ruth, and so, with the approval of Naomi and the community, Ruth and Boaz were married, and, soon after, a son was born to them. The story ends as Naomi holds their baby son.

Presenter 1: So what is special about the love relationship between Ruth and Boaz?

Presenter 2: Respect, kindness, welcoming, care for the less fortunate, according dignity to the less fortunate, generosity--giving beyond what's required.

Presenter 1: How are these two love relationships different?

Presenter 2: They are probably more similar than different. And as one love leads to the next, so the child of Ruth and Boaz is vitally important to the continuation of our people. That child, Obed, becomes the grandfather of King David.

Presenters: Chag Sameach, everyone. And now it's time for dairy desserts!

Religious identity is primarily grounded in the three “B’s” of “believing,” “belonging,” and “behaving.” Those of us who live in North America, or anywhere in which Western Civilization is our primary influence, experience religious identity mostly according to what we understand to be a Christian model – namely that our religious identity begins with and is built upon a foundation of *belief*. If you are Christian, for example, the expectation is that you have a belief in Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins. There may be other beliefs in a particular vision of heaven and hell, a particular understanding of sin, repentance and salvation or belief in the role that God’s grace may play in your individual struggle for personal salvation. In that case, the specific behaviors that you engage in as an individual believer in your particular religious tradition might naturally grow as an expression of those particular beliefs. These are such things as attending church services each Sunday, celebrating holidays and festivals, perhaps taking communion if your denomination of Christianity celebrates the Eucharist, and partaking in certain rituals that reflect your beliefs such as baptism, confirmation, and rituals related to marriage and death.

Because you may be practicing those rituals and customs and celebrations in a specific church or religious community, you may have a sense of belonging to the Palisades Lutheran Church or the First Baptist Church of Houston, or perhaps the Parish of St. Monica. This is the most common understanding in North American society of how believing, behaving, and belonging function to reinforce and even define our individual sense of religious identity.

Jewish identity on the other hand is composed of the same three “B’s” – believing, belonging, and behaving, but the order and importance are totally reversed. What gives Jews our identity is above all else, “belonging.” Our sense of belonging to the

Jewish people, being part of an ancient and extended spiritual and literal family of the Jewish people forms our primary sense of religious identity.

Judaism then is a spiritual family that extends back in time literally to the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Bible. We trace our family history to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah and the children they had who became the original 12 tribes of Israel. From that moment on nearly 4,000 years ago we have continued to experience ourselves as a family that people have joined in one of the same traditional three ways that anyone might become part of any family – they are either born into it (as “Jews by birth,”), are adopted into it (which is what we generally mean by “conversion” or becoming a “Jew by Choice”), or marry into it and become what I call “Jews by Association.”

The sense of belonging to the Jewish family or the Jewish people is always the fundamental ground of being of all Jews and how most would define themselves if they were ever asked to identify the most important component of their Jewish identity. This is why so many Jews who are not particularly religiously “observant” are still so passionate about their identity as Jews. Just like you may not show up from one year to the next to your family’s Thanksgiving dinner or annual 4th of July picnic but would stand up immediately with pride to defend your family if anyone outside were to attack or put your family down, so too it is with how most Jews experience their relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people as a whole.

Since “belonging” is what gives Jews the foundation of their religious identity, the “behaviors” of Judaism: celebrating a holiday, eating matzah on Passover or potato latkes on Hanukah, going to services on the High Holy Days or fasting on Yom Kippur, having a rabbi officiate at your wedding or circumcising your son on the eighth day of his birth, all function primarily to reinforce our sense of belonging. Doing something that you identify as a “Jewish behavior” makes you feel closer to the Jewish people and reinforces your sense of Jewish identity. The simple formula is “behaving reinforces and strengthens belonging.”

For most Jews, “believing” is a far away third in importance to both belonging and behaving when it comes to the nature of their Jewish identity. In fact, most Jews probably can’t even identify many specific Jewish beliefs in the first place beyond the obvious introduction of monotheism into the Western religious lexicon. Most Jews will tell you that the most important Jewish belief is the idea of “one God,” that regardless of the language or words anyone in the world might use to call God or describe God or refer to God, or the wide range of specific attributes that anyone might identify as belonging to God, or what specific religion any one person on our planet may claim to adhere to - God is still the same, “one” in the true sense of the word, and the creator of all life. That is what we mean when we say that we are all “God’s children,” that regardless of language or religion or race or culture, more unites us than divides us. We are all created by the same creative power in the universe that we call God.

Having said all of this, the best way to understand Judaism is as the unique cultural expression of the Jewish people and a constantly evolving religious civilization. Like any civilization, Judaism contains the multiple attributes of language, literature, art, history, culture, customs, music, ethics, holidays, celebrations, group hopes and aspirations and a common spiritual homeland.

Throughout contemporary history, there have been constant attempts at creating a “definition” of Judaism. Since it is a natural human tendency to understand things in relation to what we already know, people generally try to fit Judaism into one or another of the common categories by which other groups within society are defined. That is why, depending on who you read, Judaism has been referred to as a “religion,” a “nationality,” a “people,” a “culture,” a “race,” or a “civilization.” In fact, *all* of these labels except for “race” are true. Although Jews were originally Semites from the smallest segment of the Caucasian race, today Jews are found among nearly every race throughout the world, including black, white, and Asian.

Most Jews experience their identity as Jews primarily through what most people identify as Jewish culture. This is the result of the power of “behavior” to help form our sense of attachment to the Jewish people where our sense of belonging gives us the

identity of being Jewish in the first place. This is why people feel Jewish when they eat a bagel or gefilte fish. They feel Jewish when they hear Jewish jokes or read stories about Jews, feel a sense of Jewish pride when they listen to Itzhak Perlman play the violin or watch an Adam Sandler movie, go to a Barbra Streisand concert or see Steven Spielberg receive an Academy Award.

Often, Jews who identify themselves as “cultural” Jews wouldn’t describe their behavior or attitudes as being particularly “religious” because they generally accept the prevailing stereotype that *religious* is a term referring only to those who evidence some form of religious piety and devotion to a supernatural God through prayer and religious ritual and adhere to specific religious beliefs.

What does it mean to be ‘Religious’?

The very same qualities that many “cultural” Jews cherish in their understanding of Judaism and belonging to the Jewish people are what others mean when they say they are “*religious*.” For me, being a *religious* Jew includes a certain attitude about life, an approach to the world and relationships that validate the highest, noblest, loftiest ideas and ideals of the Jewish people and the process whereby one gives those ideals a voice in one’s everyday life.

As I understand the term, people can be called “religious” if they see the world as filled with the opportunity to discover blessings, love, caring, compassion, justice, and righteousness. Perhaps we ought to use *religious* to refer to all those who search for higher meaning in life, who believe that human beings are fundamentally created good, endowed with the ability to choose life and joy, wholeness and peace, if one is given the chance. When I see individuals and families who recognize that the most important things in life aren’t things at all; when I see parents patiently teaching their children how to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, caring from neglect, sensitivity from callousness, I describe those individuals as religious even if they wouldn’t use the same term for themselves. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that if the sunset occurred

only once every 10 years, we would be so awed by it that it would certainly appear to be a miracle. Since it happens every day, we hardly pay any attention to it at all. The soul of a religious person is the one with the vision to remain awed by the sunsets, enchanted by the rain, overjoyed by the laughter of an infant – in short, able to see the miracles that surround us each day.

“Religious” is actually a broad category that includes the striving to make sense out of the difficult moments of life and the struggle to pass on values that will move the world closer to our collective dreams. Judaism is the result of the particular 4,000 year march through the history of the Jewish people, with each generation struggling to make sense out of the world and then sharing the results of that struggle with one another and their children.

That is why I have no trouble calling many people “religious” who see themselves as “cultural.” Being religious isn’t dependent solely on the specific rituals, services, ceremonies, holidays, or customs that you celebrate. It is an all-encompassing approach to life, to people, to family, to relationships, and to the future that can be expressed in a variety of ways. Some of those ways may include the rituals, customs, and holidays that the Jewish people have developed over the thousands of years of our history. But the real point isn’t the rituals or the prayers; it is rather the values they symbolize. The rituals are cultural reminders of our most important historical events and ethical values; they are group-building symbols that help bind us together in our identity as members of the Jewish civilization; they are not the essential element in and of themselves. Bringing a sense of spirituality into your life and choosing to fill your life with the symbols of Jewish culture and ethics are aspects of your Jewish identity and the identity you bequeath to the next generation that are within your control. My most important rule of life is, “Whatever works, works,” and if it adds meaning, purpose and a sense of meaningful Jewish identity to your life then it is the right choice for you.

In a world where there are two billion Christians, a billion and a half Muslims and only about 14 million Jews, the Jewish people constitute less than one tenth of one percent of the world’s population. We would all be better off, stronger as a community,

more united and mutually supportive, if we emphasized the elements that we have in common, rather than those that divide and fragment us as a people and a community.

Judaism is How Jews Actually Live

Perhaps above all else, Judaism is simply the way of life of the Jewish people. It defies narrow definition because Judaism has evolved over the past 4,000 years into the totality of the religious strivings, national aspirations, cultural artifacts and rituals, spiritual celebrations, and philosophical ideals that are given expression in the daily lives of Jews throughout the world. Judaism is the living context within which individual Jews and the Jewish people as a whole work to create meaning and purpose in life. It allows its adherents to articulate the highest ideals of the human spirit, inspiring them to search for answers to the most profound questions the human heart and mind can confront. The rich diversity of Jewish practice, ritual, custom, theology, and philosophy that is available to the average Jewish family allows them the flexibility to literally create their own Jewish lifestyle from year to year. Just as Jewish civilization itself is in a constant process of evolution, so, too, each individual Jew and Jewish household fashions their own unique collection of holidays and celebrations, rituals and customs, folkways and traditions through the everyday process of life itself.

Creating a meaningful Jewish life is truly a lifelong experiment. It is a process whereby you are encouraged to remain open to the possibility of incorporating new aspects of the totality of Jewish civilization into the fabric of your daily life in small but meaningful increments. One of the most important lessons you can learn is that it is practically impossible to do it wrong. Jews all over the world approach Judaism and Jewish culture in so many different ways, you will find ample validation for almost *any* choices that you personally might make. The single most important step is to become willing to choose in the first place. The very act of making a decision to *do* something about creating a nurturing Jewish environment in your own life can inspire you to

realize that you *can* in fact have mastery over your own spiritual, religious and cultural destiny.

Questions to Ponder

1. What Jewish rituals and traditions do you find most meaningful and why?
2. What Jewish rituals and traditions do you find least meaningful and why?
3. If you are new to the Jewish people, which rituals or traditions were the easiest ones to incorporate into your life, which were the hardest?
4. What are three “beliefs” that you consider important aspects of your personal religious identity?
5. What behaviors or actions make you feel most connected to the Jewish people?
6. What three ideas or beliefs do you consider most representative of Judaism?
7. What are two behaviors that you might incorporate into your life that might strengthen your feeling of belonging to the Jewish civilization?
8. What might be one new ritual, custom or tradition to incorporate into your life each year? How do you imagine that would make you feel?
9. What do you imagine would be the hardest non-Jewish rituals to give up?
10. Which of the behaviors that you have incorporated into your life would you consider to be “religious” and how do they help add meaning to your life?
11. What do you consider the greatest personal benefit from experiencing a sense of belonging?

**Praise Her Works:
Conversations with Biblical Women**

Rabbi Ruth H. Sohn

Naomi Speaks

It is wonderful to be part of such a gathering of women. Long ago I learned the power of listening and the gift it is to be listened to. This is the story I am about to share with you, how the loving and attentive listening of women brought me out of pain so great it was pulling me down into Sheol. But I am getting ahead of myself. It has been so wonderful to hear the stories of those of you who have already spoken and to see parts of my life in new ways. I hope my story does the same for all of you, even if you have not suffered such losses as the death of the love of your life or, God forbid, a child.

At first the pain of losing my two sons was so great, it was too much for me. Why had God forsaken me? Why had my prayers dissolved into ash on my tongue? I was afraid. Afraid of my own pain and anger.

I raged against God and cried out against Elimelech for abandoning me and yes, I was angry even at my poor sons for dying. But mostly I was angry at myself for having failed as a mother—for having failed my sons when they needed me most, even if I had no control over the fever that had raged in them and finally taken away their breath.

Gradually I sank deeper and deeper into the dark. Everything came to be cloaked in shadows. I felt so alone. Ruth never left my side, God bless her, but I see now, that

Excerpt from a chapter by Rabbi Ruth H. Sohn in Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women, ed. Penina Adelman. The Jewish Publication Society, 2005

even as we traveled on to Beit Lehem, back to my home, I was growing more and more isolated in my grief.

Then in Beit Lehem, after their initial shock—I saw it in their faces and heard it in their whispers—“*Is this Naomi?!?*”—my dear old friends, their hearts and eyes softer with age, embraced me. Over those first days and weeks, over cups of hot tea, they listened. They allowed me to tell them the story again and again. They cried with me. They did not judge me. They held me with love and patience. For the moment, the pain would be bearable. But later, in the dark of night, the pain would sweep over me again and suck me into its powerful current, and threaten to pull me still deeper into the dark downward spiral of grief. I gradually came to know that the morning light would always come again and I could trust that the dark of the night was only temporary.

Then one night as I sat alone—Ruth was already sleeping—I again started thinking about all that had happened and when I came to my sons’ death, the pain swept over me anew, a wave of grief and loss, dizzying. But this time something was different. I did not fight it. I did not say “why me?” I did not struggle. This time, almost curious, I opened up to the pain itself. I allowed the pain to wash over me and fill me up. One moment later, my heart racing, I found myself gasping for breath. For a terrifying moment, I thought the pain would choke the breath out of me. But I stayed with it. I sat with the pain without pushing it away. Then something wonderful happened. It was as if a pool opened up inside me. The pool was my own pain, but now it did not frighten me. Rather, it calmed me and my heart opened up to it. Then the pool itself opened and deepened and suddenly I realized there were other people drinking from the pool. I saw women and men whom I knew in an instant came from distant places and spoke languages I had never heard. Yet there we were, drinking from the same pool of tears, the same pool of pain. We shared a quiet intimacy. The searing pain of a child snatched from life. The aching loss of a partner or parent we weren’t ready to lose. The devastation of war. Raging fires, famine and floods. Lingering illness. Sudden death. My

heart went out to each and every one of them, strangers, yet kin. In that moment, the pool of pain that was in my heart deepened and bloomed into a pool of *hesed* and *rahamim*, love and compassion. Compassion for myself. Compassion for the pain of the world. In that moment I knew, if I could stay open to the pain and not close my heart in fear, new life could be born for me and those around me.

From that night on, I felt different. Even as I was still grieving for my husband and my sons, I heard what people said differently—I cared again about what others felt. I felt connected deeply to everyone and everything. I felt alive.

The next morning as I was cooking the afternoon meal, I found myself thinking about Ruth. She was so loving and devoted, she asked for nothing. Even though it had been her idea to come along—I had tried to talk her out of it—she must sometimes be lonely for what she had left behind. But she never once complained or spoke of missing home. She would rub my back and my feet when they were sore without my asking, and would sing for us the songs of her youth. She seemed content. But this morning I was shaken out of my lethargy. What would happen to Ruth when I was gone? She was young and still had her whole life ahead of her. She should be taking care of a husband and children and here she was taking care of me. I needed to help her find a husband. What about Boaz? He *was* family. She was drawn to him, I could tell. But she was shy, and he was only recently a widower. Someone needed to get things started here. Perhaps...there were possibilities.

When Ruth came in later for dinner, I shared with her a plan. At first she was a bit uncertain but I assured her Boaz would respond well to her taking some quiet initiative. He was a good man and would know what to do, I told her. So that very night I sent Ruth out to the threshing floor where Boaz would be, and the next morning, Boaz went to the Elders at the Gate, and, well, you know the story.

After Ruth married Boaz, I was really alone for the first time, and to my surprise, I found I enjoyed it. After the baby was born, they asked me to move into their house and to help Ruth with the baby. How could I refuse? My life is full in a way I never dreamed it could be again.

One thing you may have wondered about. Why was it the women of Beit Lehem who named my grandson? It is true, this was very unusual. You would have expected Boaz or Ruth to name the child. But there was an important reason, a beautiful reason. You see, it was these women, my old friends who saved my life in those darkest of days. They took me back into their hearts and lives after all those years and they drew out of me some of my bitterness and anger. They listened and they held me. They helped me heal. When Ruth was big with child, I asked her and Boaz and they loved the idea. So the women were granted this great honor. And what was the name they chose? Oved. One who serves God. I hope we can succeed in teaching this child the fullness and the blessing of such a name. May God be gracious to Oved. And may Oved discover the blessing of an open heart—that it is in our reaching out to each other that we can most fully serve God.

Naomi's Message

Grief is the price we pay for the gift of love. The longer I live, the more I see that loss and grief and pain and yes, suffering, is something everyone experiences over the course of life. Some experience it earlier than others, some more than others, more than their share, we might say. But everyone who escapes an early death themselves must at some point face the searing pain of loss, the ache of sadness and loneliness, the longing for what is no more and what might have been. And while we would never invite suffering our way, when it comes it has much to teach us.

There are parts of this journey you will have to take alone, but not right away. Allow others to take care of you and help you heal. Let them in.

Do not be afraid of your grief—do not close your heart to protect yourself—this will bring you only greater pain and suffering. It will make of your heart a stone of bitterness that will pull you down into a swirling current of anger and fear that will threaten to choke the life out of you. Allow your grief to open your heart to the pain of your loss. The irony is that in opening to the pain you will also be able to feel more deeply again the love that is in the end, what really sustains us.

Open your heart. Pour out your heart before God as Hannah did—your grief, your anger, your fears and longings. Allow yourself to be carried and to be held. And if you are wondering if God is really there, turn to God *as if God is there* and see what happens. Even if you cannot feel, know this: God will never abandon you.

Allow yourself to see others' suffering from your own open heart and reach out. Reach out with a hand on a shoulder, and with food and drink. Reach out with patient listening and with words of comfort. Allow yourself to trust again in the power of love to touch, to heal and to make whole. This is the path back into life. This is why God gave us life.

Ruth's Loss: Reflections and Questions by Arlene Chernow

~ Ruth Sohn gives us an important insight into Naomi and the sadness and grief she suffers due to the loss of her husband and sons. Ruth never leaves Naomi's side and helps her build a new life. What about the losses that Ruth experiences?

~ Ruth leaves her family, her traditions, her beliefs, to cling to Naomi, her people and her God. She does this by her own choice, but even the most positive change can bring a sense of displacement. We do not know if Ruth ever saw her family of origin after she left Moab. How might Ruth feel about leaving her family of origin, possibly forever?

~ How might Ruth remember the traditions of her youth, even if she found a new people and God?

~ Did Ruth ever wish that she could share her favorite childhood memories with Oved? Did she and Boaz ever find a way to talk to Oved about her childhood, her traditions and beliefs? Were there traditions that she could share?

~ Was Ruth ever comfortable talking about her loss? If she was able to articulate her sense of loss, did she find empathy in her new community?

~ What helped Ruth build a new life in Beit Lehem? How long might it have taken for her to feel fully integrated?

Spiritual Audacity

The Role of Conversion in the Bible And The Conversion Experience

Cheryl Stone

Introduction: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a 20th century theologian and philosopher, coined the phrase “Spiritual Audacity” with regard to conversion. Audacity means one who is willing to take bold risks. Conversion involves taking a risk.

Before looking at the texts

- Take a few moments to consider what it means to be “spiritually audacious.”
- List some reasons why someone might convert to Judaism.
- List some reasons why conversion might be difficult.

There are several different portrayals of conversion in Tanakh. We will look at a few.

Avram (before he is given the name change to Avraham/Abraham) is commanded by God, (*Genesis 12:1-3*)

לך־לך מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלֶדֶתְךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ. וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי
גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדָּלְהָ שְׁמֶךָ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה. וְאֶבְרַכָּה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אָמֵן
וּבְרַכּוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה.

"Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name, and [you shall] be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you."

Avram packs up his belongings, grabs his wife Sarai (whose name will be changed shortly as well), his nephew Lot, and וְאֶת־הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן, all the souls that they

had made/acquired in Haran, where they had been residing, and began the journey to Canaan.

What could the *passuk*/sentence mean when it says וְאֶת־הַנַּפְשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן, and all the souls that they had made/acquired in Haran?

Rabbi Shlomo Yitchaki, also known as Rashi (רש"י), one of the most well-known Torah commentators and scholars from 10th century France, brings two different interpretations of this *passuk*. There is the straightforward read that this is referring to slaves and maidservants. The second is a more intriguing interpretation:

שֶׁהִכְנִיסָן תַּחַת כְּנָפֵי הַשְּׁכִינָה, אֲבִרָהֶם מִגֵּייר אֶת הָאֲנָשִׁים, וְסָרָה מִגֵּיירַת הָאֲנָשִׁים, וּמַעֲלָה עֲלֵיהֶם הַכָּתוּב כְּאִלּוּ עָשׂוּם.

whom he had brought under the wings of the Shechinah. Abraham would convert the men, and Sarah would convert the women, and scripture ascribes to them [a merit] as if they had made them.
(Gen. Rabbah 39:14)

What does it mean to think of Abraham and Sarah, our our ancestors, before there was ever a Jewish nation, converting people to their belief in one God?

After the Jews left Egypt and before they settled the land, they were given many instructions, some of which included how to treat the *ger* (גר), the stranger and how the *ger* should behave. The word *ger* comes from the verb *lagur* (לגור) which means “to live with” or “to travel with.” In the Torah, *ger* refers to those who choose to live with the Israelites and follow some of the laws, but not identify completely as Israelites and take on all the laws. The word *ger* appears 92 times in Tanakh, most of which are found in Torah.

Many of the times that the *ger* is mentioned, it is to say that they are subject to many of the same rules as the Israelites. However, the *ger* also holds a special status, as one who is not to be mistreated. For example:

Leviticus 23:22

וּבְקִצְרְכֶם אֶת־קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא־תִכְלֶה פֶּאֶת שְׂדֶךְ בְּקִצְרְךָ וְלִקֵּט קִצִּירְךָ לֹא
תִּלְקֹט לְעַנִּי וְלִגֵּר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

When you reap the harvest of your Land, you shall not completely remove the corner of your field during your harvesting, and you shall not gather up the gleanings of your harvest. [Rather,] you shall leave these for the poor person and for the **stranger**. I am the Lord, your God.

Later, the prophets would highlight the mistreatment of the *ger*, along with that of the orphans, widows and others who were in positions to be taken advantage of.

Zechariah 7:10

וְאַל־מָנָה וַיְתוֹם גֵּר וְעַנִּי אַל־תַּעֲשִׂקוּ וְרַעַת אִישׁ אָחִיו אַל־תַּחֲשֹׁבוּ בְלִבְבְּכֶם:
Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, or the poor man.
Neither shall any of you think evil against his brother in your heart.

It would be centuries later when the rabbis of the Talmud would reinterpret the word *ger* to mean someone who had converted, fully identifying with the Jewish people and taking on all the commandments.

Today, the word *ger* is used to refer to a convert. Given the history of the word, what do you think the rabbis had in mind when they decided to use that word to mean a convert? Putting this meaning back into the Bible, how should someone who converts be treated? Lastly, we will look at Megillat Ruth. The story of Ruth takes place during the period of the Shoftim/Judges, after the Israelites have conquered the land and are residing there, but do not yet have a king. Ruth is a story about two women, Naomi, an older Israelite

who had fled to Moab with her husband and two sons and Ruth, a Moabite who marries one of Naomi's sons. When Naomi's husband and two sons die, Naomi wishes to return to Israel. She does not wish to bring her two daughter-in-laws with her because back in Israel she will be a widow without property, money or other resources. Determined, Ruth vows to go back with Naomi saying:

אַל-תִּפְגְּעִי-בִי לְעֶזְבְךָ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ כִּי אֶל-אִשְׁרֵי תִלְכִּי אֵלַי וּבְאִשְׁרֵי תִלְיִנִי אֵלַי
עִמָּךְ עַמִּי וְאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי. בְּאִשְׁרֵי תִמּוּתֵי אִמּוֹתַי וְשָׁם אֶקְבֹּר כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְקֹוֹק לִי וְכֹה
יִוֹסִיף כִּי הַמָּוֶת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶךָ.

"Do not entreat me to leave you, to return from following you, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So may the Lord do to me and so may He continue, if anything but death separate me and you."

(Chapter 1: 16-17)

With these words, Ruth becomes the first official *ger* in the modern sense, a convert. What are some of the risks that Ruth would face by taking on Naomi's faith and leaving behind her own?

Ruth indeed returns to Israel and then provides nourishment for both herself and Naomi by gathering grain in the field. There is a biblical law which states that stalks of grain that fall when being harvested are to be left behind for the poor - *leket* (לקט). While gathering the stalks of grain, Ruth is noticed and then later protected by Boaz, the landowner and distant relative to Naomi. A simple romance blossoms ending with Naomi and Boaz getting married. There are two declarations from the people of the city regarding Ruth. First, this one from the elders and those who were at the gate:

עֲדִים! יִתֵּן יְקֹוֹק אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה הַבָּאָה אֶל-בֵּיתְךָ כְּרָחֵל וְכִלְאָה אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ שְׂתִיָּהֶם
אֶת-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וַעֲשֵׂה-חֵיל בְּאֶפְרָתָה וּקְרָא-שֵׁם בְּבֵית לָחֶם.

"[We are] witnesses! May the Lord make the woman who is entering your house like Rachel and like Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel, and prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem."

And this one by the women of the town to Naomi after Ruth conceived and bore a son:

בְּרוּךְ יְקֹזֵק אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִשְׁבִּית לָךְ גֹּאֵל הַיּוֹם וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. וְהָיָה לָךְ
לְמַשִּׁיב נָפֶשׁ וּלְכֹלֵל אֶת־שִׁיבֶתְךָ כִּי כָלִיתְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אַהֲבָתְךָ יִלְדְּתוּ אֲשֶׁר־הִיא
טוֹבָה לָךְ מִשִּׁבְעָה בָּנִים.

"Blessed is the Lord, Who did not deprive you of a redeemer today, and may his name be famous in Israel. And may he be to you a restorer of life and to sustain your old age, for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, bore him, and she is better to you than seven sons."

Given these two statements, how does the community view Ruth and her becoming part of their community? King David is the great-grandson of Ruth and Boaz. What does this say about biblical response to Ruth the convert?

We have looked at three parts: Avraham and Sara created souls that they then bring with them on their journey to Canaan. When the Israelites are out in the desert, before conquering the land, they are commanded to take care of the *ger*/stranger. Ruth, the Moabite is the first convert and is warmly embraced by the community, even to the point where she is granted the honor of being the forebearer of the greatest of the Israelites kings. Given these perspectives, what might be understood is the biblical view toward the treatment of the convert? What was spiritually audacious in the actions of Abraham and Sara? Of Ruth? How can we use these examples to better understand the challenges and rewards of choosing to join the Jewish community? How might this influence how we see converts within our own community?

Introduction

Why do people convert to Judaism?

Might some Jews-by-birth, including rabbis, regard some reasons for converting as “better” than others? Why?

Read Yalkut Shimoni, Shelah 14

- What draws the first type of individual to Judaism?
- How does he imagine that conversion will change his life?
 - (positive – pleasant eating habits, certain observances); negative – none mentioned but he is giving up old habits) Why are eating habits and Shabbat and festival observance highlighted? (visibility – these practices are known to non-Jews; these are seen as pluses of Judaism by the author of the midrash)
- What do we learn from the phrase “he perseveres?”
- How are we to respond to such a person?
- What draws the second type of individual to Judaism?
- How does he imagine that conversion will change his life?

(There is no indication that, except for the possibility of the desired marriage, he has a clue)
- How are we to respond to such a person? Does this surprise you in a midrash?
- What draws the third type of individual to Judaism?
- How does he imagine that conversion will change his life?
- How are we to respond to such a person?
- What is the take away from this text?

Read Yalkut Shimoni Bo 247

- What is conveyed by Moses' surprise about the comparison between the *ger* and the Levite?
- What, according to this midrash, distinguishes *gerim* from Jews by birth?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages to these two paths to God (through history, on one's own)?
- What can Jews by birth and *gerim* learn about Judaism from each other?

Yalkut Shimoni, Shelah 14

There are three types of [prospective] *gerim*: A *ger* who is like a Gentile in every way, a *ger* who is like Hamor (Genesis 35), and a *ger* who is like our father Abraham.

A *ger* who is like a Gentile in every way – What is his story? This type of individual has previously eaten all types of forbidden food. One day he says, “I will convert and be among those whose eating habits are pleasant and who observe the Sabbath and the festivals. All these [forbidden foods] in my house shall be removed.” He perseveres and becomes a *ger*... The Holy Blessed One says to Israel, “My children, since this one loves you, you must love him,” as it is written, ‘You shall love the *ger*’ (Deut. 10:19).”

A *ger* who is like Hamor -- What is his story? This type of individual wants to marry a Jewish woman. They say to him, “We will not allow you to marry her unless you become a Jew.” He perseveres and becomes a *ger*... The Holy Blessed One says to Israel, “My children, since

ילקוט שמעוני תורה פרשת שלח [רמז תשמב]

שלש מדות יש בגרים, יש גר כנכרי לכל דבר, יש גר משול כחמור, ויש גר כאברהם אבינו.

יש גר כנכרי לכל דבר כיצד היו לו נבלות וטרפות בתוך ביתו ואמר אלך ואתגייר ואהיה ביניהם של אלו שאכילתן יפה ויש להם ימים טובים ושבתות ויכלו אלו בתוך ביתי כפף את עצמו והלך ונתגייר אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל בני כשם שאהב זה אתכם אף אתם אהבו אותו שנאמר ואהבתם את הגר.

יש גר משול כחמור כיצד הלך ונשא אשה מישראל, א"ל אין אנו נותנין לך עד שתתגייר וכפף את עצמו והלך ונתגייר א"ל הקב"ה לישראל בני כשם שבקש זה מכם מנוחה אף אתם תנו לו מנוחה שנאמר וגר לא תונה.

<p>this person has sought refuge among you, you must grant him refuge, as it is written, ‘You shall not oppress a <i>ger</i>’ (Ex. 22:20).”</p> <p>A <i>ger</i> who is like our father Abraham – What is his story? This type of individual searches among all the nations of the earth. When he sees that they all speak well of Israel, he says, “I will convert and come under the wings of the Shekhina.” Regarding such an individual, Scripture says (Isaiah 56:3, 5): Let not the foreigner who has attached himself to Adonai say, "The Lord will surely separate me from His people."</p>	<p>יש גר כאברהם אבינו כיצד הלך ופשפש את כל אומות העולם כיון שראה שהם מספרים בטובתן של ישראל אמר אלך ואתגייר ואכנס תחת כנפי השכינה שנאמר ואל יאמר בן הנכר הנלוה אל־יקוק לאמר הבדל יבדילני יקוק מעל עמו</p>
--	---

<p><u>Yalkut Shimoni, Bo, 247</u></p> <p>“There shall be one law for the citizen and for the <i>ger</i>...” (Ex. 12:49). Moreover, to Me, [the <i>ger</i>] is equal to the Levite, as it is said, “And the Levite... and the <i>ger</i> shall come” (Deut. 14:29). Moses said to the Holy Blessed One, “Master of the Universe, to You, this <i>ger</i> is like the Levite?!” God said to him, “This one is greater, because s/he became a <i>ger</i> for My sake.”</p> <p>It is comparable to a gazelle that grew up in the wild and of its own volition came and mingled with the sheep. The shepherd gave it food and water, and loved it more than the sheep. They asked, “Why is this gazelle dearer to you than the sheep?”</p> <p>He said, “How much effort have I expended for my sheep, leading them in and out, morning and evening, until they reached maturity. This</p>	<p><u>ילקוט שמעוני תורה פרשת בא [רמז קפז]</u></p> <p>תורה אחת יהיה לאזרח וגו', ולא עוד אלא שהוא שקול עלי כלוי שנאמר ובא הלוי כי אין לו, אמר משה לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע הגר הזה כלוי לפניך א"ל גדול הוא לפני שנתגייר לשמי,</p> <p>משל לצבי שגדל במדבר ובא מעצמו ונתערב בצאן היה הרועה מאכילו ומשקהו ומחבבו יותר מצאנו אמרו לו לצבי זה אתה מחבב יותר מן הצאן,</p> <p>אמר להם כמה יגיעות יגעתי בצאני מוציאן בבקר ומכניסן בערב עד שנתגדלו, וזה שגדל במדברות</p>
---	--

one grew in the wild and in the forests, and joined my flock of its own volition; thus I hold it dear.” So the Holy Blessed One – “How much effort did I expend for Israel. I took them out of Egypt, and revealed Myself to them. I gave them manna and quail, and brought forth the well. I surrounded them with My clouds of glory and then they received the Torah – and this one came to Me on his/her own. This is why s/he is to Me equal to a [Jew by birth].”

וביערים ובא מעצמו לתוך צאני לכך אני מחבבן,
כך הקדוש ב"ה כמה יגעת בישראל הוצאתים
ממצרים הראיתי לפניהם הורדתי להם את המן
הגזתי להם את השלו העליתי להם את הבאר
הקפתים ענני כבוד עד שקבלו תורת וזה בא
מעצמו לפיכך שקול עלי כישראל וכו':

Translations by Dvora Weisberg, Ph.D.



Funded in part by
The Gallant Family Fund,
The Herbert H. Schiff Foundation